

Dan Fumano: Bringing indigenous principles to urban design in East Van



DAN FUMANO

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Architect Ouri Scott discusses incorporating indigenous principles of design into the City of Vancouver's redevelopment of the Britannia Community Services Centre. *GERRY KAHRMANN / PNG*

As the redevelopment of one of Vancouver's most-used and best-loved community hubs turns a corner, Ouri Scott says it marks a chance to bring indigenous principles to urban design.

Over the last four decades, the 18-acre Britannia Community Services Centre has touted itself as "the heart of the community," combining the century-old secondary school, an elementary school, public library, ice rink, swimming pool and a community centre with a densely packed schedule of recreational and social programming. The hub in Grandview, just off Commercial Drive, resides in one of B.C.'s most multicultural neighbourhoods and is used by all kinds of people of all ages, with a particular importance in the urban First Nations community.

But the centre is also overdue for renewal, the city says, with reports of deterioration and design problems arising as early as the 1990s. After years of effort, the City of Vancouver's Britannia Renewal (<http://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/britannia-renewal-project.aspx>) project has funding in place and community engagement is underway.

Now Scott, an architect working on the master planning of the Britannia renewal, said the project is a chance to "use the values of indigenous culture as a way to guide the design process," highlighting the importance of making space for inter-generational teaching, reflecting on the past and looking into the future, and respecting the natural environment.

In this context, indigenous design is more about philosophy than about aesthetics.

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Scott, a member of the Tlilcho First Nation from Yellowknife, said an inspiring example of indigenous design was the [Aboriginal Children's Village](http://www.vancourier.com/news/aboriginal-children-s-village-opens-in-east-vancouver-1.678104) that opened in 2013 (<http://www.vancourier.com/news/aboriginal-children-s-village-opens-in-east-vancouver-1.678104>) in East Vancouver. Designed by architect Patrick Stewart of the Nisga'a First Nation, the facility is "reshaping how we think about care for kids," Scott said. The building provides permanent homes for foster children — it's the foster parents, not the kids, who move in-and-out.

Scott, one of the first indigenous women to graduate from the University of B.C.'s Master of Architecture program, said the application of these design principles is meant for the benefit of the whole city, not only the First Nations community in the area.

"From an urban-design and planning perspective, I think there are some of these unifying principles where we can look to indigenous culture, and these things they unify all people," she said. "In Vancouver, we don't just have many different First Nations in this area, but we have many different people from all around the world who have come here and made it their home ... When we're talking about sustaining our natural environment, that is something that's necessary for all of us. When we talk about honouring our children, we all have children."





City of Vancouver councillor Andrea Reimer. *NICK PROCAYLO / PNG*

Vancouver Coun. Andrea Reimer has been involved with the renewal for more than a decade, predating her time as a councillor going back to her years as a Vancouver school board trustee and Grandview resident.

By the late 1990s, according to the city's website for the Britannia renewal, "staff and the community begin to flag problems with a deteriorating site with many design flaws, and to recognize a need for expansion and renewal."

The buildings, on a whole, are in decent shape, but have been deteriorating and weren't ideally designed for Vancouver's wet, rainy climate, Reimer said, adding: "The whole complex could definitely benefit from a built form more suited to our natural environment."

Indigenous design is an emerging and growing concept in the world of urban planning and architecture. The 110-year-old Royal Architectural Institute of Canada formed an Indigenous Task Force last year (of which Scott is a member), and this month in Ottawa will host the association's first International Indigenous Architecture and Design Symposium (<https://raic.org/raic/indigenous-task-force>), attracting indigenous architects and design professionals from across Canada, as well as New Zealand, Australia and the U.S.

Scott will speak at a forum at 7 p.m. on Thursday in the Britannia Secondary School auditorium, entitled "Community Resilience and

Design.”

Asked if it’s a challenge to reconcile the concrete jungle of the urban environment with an underlying respect for the natural world, Scott said: “If we let there be too much of a challenge, then there will be.

“But ... we have to just go for it. Because of the state of our environment, in terms of climate change and the depletion of natural resources,” Scott said. “It’s an imperative, so we just have to figure out how to do it.”

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